

State Virtual Schools — Successes and Growing Pains

SREB Educational Technology Cooperative
Summary of the 2007 *Report on State Virtual Schools*

SREB

Nearly all SREB states have a state-sponsored virtual school, and the remaining states are either planning or beginning initial implementation.

Just 12 years ago, none of the 50 states used the Web to provide courses to middle grades or high school students. By 2000, several SREB states, including Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana and West Virginia, had or were beginning to implement state-sponsored virtual schools. Today, SREB states lead the nation in the creation of state virtual schools. The total number of middle grades and high school students enrolled in state virtual schools throughout the region has increased steadily each year. Student enrollment in state virtual schools in academic year 2006-2007 rose from the previous year in nearly every participating SREB state.

What is triggering this growth?

There is a growing understanding that providing Web-based courses to middle grades and high school students works. Online courses provided by state virtual schools are beginning to reach the many students who simply do not have access to courses in their local school. The importance of this access will only increase as more states raise their high school graduation requirements. Many schools, especially small rural schools, simply do not have access to quality teachers in many subjects, particularly in mathematics and science. Providing students with a way to retake courses and graduate on time is becoming increasingly important in several SREB states.

What are the key obstacles to continued growth of state virtual schools?

While the use of the Web to provide courses has been possible for more than a decade, some do not yet fully recognize its potential. Using the Web to provide middle grades and high school courses is so different from some teachers' personal educational experiences that many teachers have difficulty understanding it. In addition, while the number of students taking online courses has grown in recent years, the percentage of students taking these courses is still very small. An increasing number of state policy- and decision-makers are recognizing the value of state virtual schools in their attempts to meet their state's academic requirements and provide their students with 21st century skills to better prepare them for work and careers.

Web-based courses and online learning are fundamentally different from how most instruction has been provided in schools. Online learning depends on the use of technology, including computers and the Web. What is significant, but often overlooked, is that the focus is on student learning, not on teachers teaching. Unlike in a traditional classroom, students cannot sit in the

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back of the room and be successful online students. They must be actively engaged, and they must possess reasonable communication and time-management skills. Teachers, too, must adapt their teaching styles to become successful online teachers. Not all teachers are able to make this transition.

A state virtual school is a new entity that typically requires each state to establish new policies and sometimes eliminate or modify existing policies. Among key policy issues are funding, quality control, accountability, and organizational and management issues.

What does SREB's 2007 Report on State Virtual Schools tell us about the growth and current status of state virtual schools in SREB states?

The report is based on the Cooperative's third annual survey of state virtual schools. It shows that, while state virtual schools may differ from each other in scope and size, they are far more similar in the ways they are organized and operate. Highlights about students, courses and teachers in SREB state virtual schools are provided below to illustrate these similarities and the directions state virtual schools are choosing to take. Other topics summarized include SREB publications, accountability and funding.

Students in SREB state virtual schools

Why do students take SREB state virtual school online courses?

The course was unavailable in the local school was reported by all states as one of the most important reasons. SREB promotes state virtual schools specifically to fill the gaps in academic courses that are available in each student's local school. Often these are higher-level mathematics and science, foreign language and Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

Other reasons include *avoiding schedule conflicts* that would otherwise prevent students from taking specific courses, retaking a course (remedial instruction) to allow a student to graduate on time, or to avoid dropping out of school. Another reason identified by at least five states was that *online courses allow students to catch up because of inadequate academic preparation*.

A related and equally important issue was **why students drop online courses**. Interestingly, *the course was too difficult* was cited more often than any other reason. The two most likely explanations are that previous courses left students inadequately prepared or that the very nature of the online course — which places emphasis on student performance — was too demanding. *Falling behind and could not catch up* also was reported often. This represents an important time-management issue for both the students and the teachers.

Other reasons for dropping a course include the *inability to adjust to taking courses online, a poor match between student and instructor* and possessing a *lack of self-discipline to work independently*. Of these issues, the ability of students and teachers to manage their time efficiently and effectively without personal day-to-day contact is extremely important for successful teaching and learning to occur. Careful monitoring of student work and teaching time-management skills can help to overcome these problems.

Technical problems, including inadequate technical support, technology unavailable when needed and the use of outdated computers and related equipment, were reported to a limited extent. Based

on information provided in this report, adapting to a new learning environment and instructional issues were more often cited as reasons for students dropping a course than were technical issues.

How many schools report that students took courses as “retake” courses?

Less than half of the state virtual schools currently focus on this issue, but the number is growing — and growing rapidly. An increasing number of students are retaking courses for some of the obvious reasons: to graduate on time and/or as an alternative to dropping out of school. It would seem reasonable to assume that repeating a course online provides students with a fresh perspective and a new experience removed from the negative outcome of their face-to-face course. Only time and research will reveal the extent that online learning will help states improve high school graduation rates, but given that states have tried many other approaches that for the most part have seen limited success, this approach is worth support.

Providing retake courses presents challenges to state virtual schools. Online teachers often need to adapt their courses to the unique learning needs of these students and — to the extent possible — focus *not* on what each student knows, but what he or she needs to learn to pass the course. The structure and content of the online course also are an issue. Two years ago, Maryland designed a course specifically for students who failed or were failing algebra. The course is now offered by schools across the state. Providing retake courses such as this takes considerable time and state resources, but results are worth the effort.

How many students were enrolled in online courses through SREB state virtual schools during the 2006-2007 school year?

It was reported that 157,698 students were enrolled in SREB state virtual school courses. Most state virtual schools have experienced growth in student enrollments over the three years SREB has collected this information. Florida Virtual School, the oldest and the only virtual school with a funding policy that avoids barriers to growth, has by far the largest enrollment. Growth — or the lack of growth — does not reflect lack of student academic need for access to quality courses or quality teachers. A tremendous number of students could benefit from these courses, but lack of sound funding policies appears to be the single greatest obstacle to growth. Most state virtual schools are legislatively funded through an annual allotment; in fact, one of the unintended consequences of this approach is that courses are no longer provided when the virtual school has used all of its funds. This has happened frequently with many of the state virtual schools. In two states, Kentucky and Maryland, funding comes in part or fully from schools. Their experiences, since they were first launched, indicate that this approach is a significant obstacle to student access to courses.

It is important to keep in mind while reviewing enrollment figures that most students take online courses from their state virtual school to fill gaps in the courses that are available in their local school, and they usually take only one or perhaps two courses in any given school year. State virtual schools are not replacements for traditional schools, but they are exceptional resources to help schools achieve their academic goals.

Enrollments by Year

	2005	2006	2007
Alabama	300	2,064	7,289
Arkansas	2,460	2,807	3,850
Delaware	54	0	0
Florida	33,767	67,675	114,090
Georgia	0	2,143	4,331
Kentucky	2,220	4,092	1,352
Louisiana	2,225	5,200	5,605
Maryland	302	727	782
Mississippi	234	1,185	3,483
North Carolina	1,889	3,627	7,251
Oklahoma	1,925	2,126	1,737
South Carolina	0	0	2,407
Tennessee	0	443	1,155
Texas	0	0	0
Virginia	1,400	1,890	3,198
West Virginia	1,355	1,323	1,559
Total	48,131	95,302	157,698

Courses in SREB state virtual schools

Do SREB state virtual schools provide courses for students from kindergarten through grade 12?

No. Eight of the SREB state virtual schools provide courses only for high school students, and seven provide courses for middle grades and high school students. No SREB state virtual school provides courses for elementary school students. All states started their virtual schools by addressing high school course needs. For many states, it became important to add middle grades courses to help reduce the “ninth-grade bulge” (a rise in the number of academically unprepared students who typically are held back in ninth grade), caused at least in part by the lack of qualified teachers in many middle grades schools.

What kinds of courses do SREB state virtual schools offer?

Types of courses provided by a state virtual school are dependent on issues related to state mandates and identified student academic needs. While states report an interest in expanding their course offerings, often the reason given for not doing so is lack of adequate funds. Course types range from core academic courses to those needed to obtain GED credentials, graduate on time or “catch up” on academic preparation for another course, such as Algebra I.

Do the courses that states offer belong to them?

The simple answer is: sometimes. It is usually less expensive for a state virtual school to outsource a course (contract with a third-party provider) if only a few students need that course at any given time. However, it is usually more cost effective for states to create a high-demand course and then make as many copies as needed to meet the demand. By owning a course, states also are able to provide greater oversight on how the course is taught. In addition, some states prefer ownership to help ensure quality.

Course Types Offered

	Advanced Placement	Core Academic Courses	Non-Core Electives	Technical	GED	Retake or Catch-Up	Other
Alabama	9	18	12	2	0	5	2
Arkansas	5	33	5	0	0	30	0
Delaware	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Florida	10	35	21	6	0	0	10
Georgia	20	45	4	11	0	17	0
Kentucky	23	15	25	0	1	15	0
Louisiana	2	21	13	0	0	0	0
Maryland	26	28	1	11	0	11	14
Mississippi	10	14	6	3	0	0	0
North Carolina	18	35	3	4	0	0	14
Oklahoma	8	54	30	7	0	0	0
South Carolina	3	13	6	0	0	0	0
Tennessee	0	22	8	3	0	12	0
Texas	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Virginia	20	0	4	0	0	0	8
West Virginia	29	20	129	28	0	0	0

It should be noted that course development can be expensive if done correctly. Each course typically is developed by a team composed of a content specialist, an instructional specialist, a course design specialist, and an information technology specialist. In addition, each course should be reviewed by others for accuracy and then field-tested before being used extensively by students. Today, much of this work is done by creating “learning object” or modular pieces of course content that can be reused and shared over and over. Once each course is created, the state saves money through the ability to make as many copies of the course as it needs.

What Advanced Placement (AP) courses are offered by SREB state virtual schools?

All SREB state virtual schools offer some AP courses. The SREB region can take pride in the fact that one or more SREB state virtual schools offer 31 of the 37 AP courses available to students by the College Board. One SREB state, Virginia, has a mission of providing AP courses, and its state virtual school provides approximately 20 different AP courses. State virtual schools give every high school the opportunity to offer AP courses regardless of where it is located — even if there is only one student who wants the course. This is especially interesting since several SREB states have enacted code in recent years mandating their schools offer two to four different AP courses. Why limit the number to a few courses when so many are now available electronically?

AP courses offered in SREB state virtual schools:

AP Art History	AP German Language
AP Biology	AP Human Geography
AP Calculus AB	AP Latin Literature
AP Calculus BC	AP Latin Vergil
AP Chemistry	AP Macroeconomics
AP Computer Science A	AP Microeconomics
AP Computer Science B	AP Music Theory
AP Government & Politics: Comp	AP Physics B
AP Government & Politics: U.S.	AP Physics C
AP English Language	AP Psychology
AP English Literature and Composition	AP Spanish Language
AP English Language and Composition	AP Spanish Literature
AP European History	AP Statistics
AP Environmental Science	AP U.S. History
AP French Language	AP World History
AP French Literature	

Teachers in SREB state virtual schools

What are your state's major considerations in employing quality online teachers?

Among the most often cited considerations are academic preparation (including certification in the discipline taught), teaching experience, online teaching skills, written communications skills, and time-management skills. All SREB state virtual schools currently employ only experienced teachers. These considerations are in line with the SREB *Standards for Quality Online Teaching*.

Who are these online teachers?

The part-time teachers employed by SREB state virtual schools fall into two categories. Many are employed by third-party providers as part of contracts between the state virtual school and the course provider. Others are employed by the state virtual school to teach courses owned by the state virtual school. Many of these teachers also are currently teaching in schools within their state. Most teach one online course per semester. Full-time teachers come from several sources, including teachers who want a new experience away from the traditional classroom, teachers on leave from their school for medical or maternity leave, stay-at-home mothers or fathers, and retired teachers.

SREB publications adopted in SREB state virtual schools

Working with states last year, SREB developed several publications in support of state virtual schools.

How many SREB state virtual schools use these publications?

The results of the survey are as follows:

<i>Cost Guidelines for Evaluating Online Courses</i>	7
<i>Standards for Online Quality Courses</i>	14
<i>Checklist for Evaluating Online Courses</i>	12
<i>Standards for Quality Online Teaching</i>	13
<i>Online Teaching Evaluation for State Virtual Schools</i>	11

State Virtual School Teachers

	Full Time	Part Time
Alabama	0	133
Arkansas	6	23
Delaware	0	0
Florida	318	160
Georgia	0	120
Kentucky	0	48
Louisiana	16	41
Maryland	0	11
Mississippi	0	96
North Carolina	0	0
Oklahoma	0	28
South Carolina	0	34
Tennessee	0	88
Texas	0	0
Virginia	19	15
West Virginia	4	17

Accountability: Measuring success in SREB state virtual schools

Are SREB state virtual schools successful?

Yes! One important way that SREB state virtual schools measure success is by using an external evaluation to assess the extent to which the virtual school is meeting its goals and provide an unbiased perspective on what is working and what needs to be accomplished for further improvement. Ten SREB state virtual schools conducted such an evaluation during the 2006-2007 academic year.

Another reason for success is that, as one of the virtual school leaders stated, “We live in a glass house, and since we are still so new, everyone is always watching us.” Whether this is true as stated could be questioned, but undoubtedly the work of state virtual schools is closely monitored in SREB states. One piece of good news for states as they monitor virtual schools is that because they are technology initiatives, virtual schools can provide a tremendous amount of information and data on all aspects of their work — far more in many cases than brick-and-mortar schools.

Funding SREB state virtual schools

What is the level of financial support provided in SREB state virtual schools?

The level of funding for most states is directly related to the number of students the state virtual school serves. Most state virtual schools receive their primary or total funding from an annual legislative allotment. Two states, Maryland and Kentucky, receive most of their funding from the schools they serve. The Alabama level of funding includes money for online courses and courses provided by videoconferencing; it also includes funding for technology upgrades and improvements. Florida

2006-2007 Revenue

Alabama	\$ 11,300,000
Arkansas	500,000
Delaware	0
Florida	50,000,000
Georgia	2,693,000
Kentucky	850,000
Louisiana	3,921,545
Maryland	250,000
Mississippi	1,962,475
North Carolina	5,100,000
Oklahoma	393,000
South Carolina	380,000
Tennessee	1,900,000
Texas	0
Virginia	2,750,000
West Virginia	450,000

Virtual School receives its funding based on 2004 legislation that directs a portion of state's annual per student allocation (FTE) to Florida Virtual School for each student who successfully completes an online course provided by Florida Virtual School. Currently, this represents slightly over \$600 per successfully completed course.

Summary

The idea of a new state entity created to use technology to provide quality teacher-led academic courses for middle grades and high school students was not on anyone's radar just 10 years ago. The creation and growth of SREB state virtual schools over recent years — and the increasing number of students enrolled — are quite remarkable and a compliment to those responsible for their implementation.

Should state virtual school student enrollment in the SREB region grow significantly beyond its current level? *Yes!* SREB state policy-makers have every reason to expect this use of technology to become increasingly important in meeting the academic needs of more students in their states in the years to come. Building on the success of state virtual schools by increasing student access to high-quality courses bodes well for helping states achieve their educational goals.

How states should fund their state virtual schools to ensure sustainability and growth continues to be a key factor in the success of each state virtual school. As detailed in this report, growth in providing needed academic courses in many states is limited by funding allocations. This issue should be addressed in each state.